

The Misunderstood Holy Spirit – Part 1

I think if there is one subject that has been more misunderstood, more misinterpreted and more abused in the church in the last century – it must be that of the Holy Spirit. The church has been more divided, more segmented, and more confused through differing doctrines and interpretations of the Holy Spirit in the last 100 years than at possibly any time in its history.

Church history shows a few incidents where controversy broke out regarding the Holy Spirit, but nothing comes close to the rampant confusion and disagreement one finds on the subject of the Holy Spirit. One of the reasons why there is so little agreement on the Holy Spirit is that there lacks agreement as to where we find the answers regarding the Holy Spirit. What is our authority for discussing His nature and His work?

For example, if you want to know about the technical specifications of a particular car – your authority is the manual, the blueprints, the documents produced by the car's manufacturer. Sure, you might get some helpful hints from a car enthusiast, you might learn something from a car magazine or show – but those cannot be your final authority. In fact, they cannot be authority at all. The ultimate authority must rest in the designer's documents.

Now when we come to the Holy Spirit, the major hurdle we must overcome is to agree where our final authority is for understanding Him. There are generally two views:

- **The one view says:** The Bible is my final authority. The Holy Spirit wrote Scripture, and there He records all that we need to know about Him and His work.
- **The second view says:** the Bible *and my experience* is my authority. So, yes, I rely on the Bible, but if I experience something different to what the Bible says, then that is also true, because I experienced it.

Now, of those two views, which is the correct one? Obviously the first one. It is not that our experience has no value, or that we must be content with no experience of God. That is not what we are saying. But what we are saying is that personal experience is worthless when it comes to determining truth. See, Peter knew and understood this when he wrote the following:

For He received from God the Father honour and glory, when there came such a voice to Him from the excellent glory, 'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.' And this voice which came from Heaven we heard, when we were with Him in the holy mount. We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts: Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.

2 Peter 1:17-21

Peter was saying, we had an amazing experience. Literally, a mountaintop experience! But, says Peter, we have a more sure, a more reliable source of information, a more trustworthy

authority. What could that be? What could have more authority than audibly hearing the voice of God? Verse 20 says: the Scriptures.

He then tells us, no Scripture is of a personal, subjective experience, instead, it is the literal Word of God since the men who wrote Scripture, were borne along by the Holy Spirit. So, Peter says, my personal experience is not authoritative. He add, look, we didn't lie to you when we told you what happened on the mountain. It really did happen. But that's not what you need to put your trust in – you need to heed the Word.

See, experience can change. Experiences can differ in one person to another. Experiences can be influenced by environment, circumstances, even your emotional and mental state. In short, experience is subjective – it's not reliable for determining truth. The written Word of God is objective and unchanging, and therefore profitable and reliable.

As much as our culture teaches us this, something is not true simply because we experienced it. Truth doesn't become truth because you think it's true. Nor does truth become false because you think it's false. Truth remains truth – forever settled in Heaven. If our experience does not harmonise with the truth, then it's our experience that is false.

That's humbling, I know! But pride exalts itself and its own experience above the truth. Humility wrestles itself and even its experience into submission to the truth. So when it comes to the Holy Spirit, we must ask, are you going to judge the truth about Him by your experience, or are you going to judge your experience of Him by the truth?

We need to make the Bible the final authority for understanding the Holy Spirit, even if our experience or the reports of others' experiences seems to differ with that. So let's roll up our sleeves and get into the Word of God to try and understand the misunderstood Holy Spirit.

There are two fundamental errors that the church has committed regarding the Holy Spirit. The one is to underemphasise Him. They fear mentioning the Holy Spirit. He seems rather uncontrollable, rather dangerous, like He might come and mess up the order of service. They are also reacting to the extremes present in other churches, and so the Holy Spirit is seldom spoken about, hardly mentioned, and suppressed as a teaching.

In such churches, the Holy Spirit is part of the doctrinal statement, but not part of the life of the church. Thus the power of God, the true leading of God, is absent, or quenched. As someone has said, if The Holy Spirit were to leave, the chances are that churches like these would continue and not notice.

The other error is to overemphasise the Holy Spirit. In these churches, He becomes the focus. Rather than working with Him to exalt Christ, they instead exalt Him all the time. The emphasis is on supernaturally experiencing Him, the gifts of the Spirit are made a test of salvation, and an air of arrogance begins to descend on the church: 'We have the monopoly on the Holy Spirit, He really *works* in our church.'

Unfortunately, this often leads to extremes, to a subjective theology based on experience, to basically many of the problems that occurred in the Corinthian church – spiritual immaturity, a lack of discernment, and divisions. So clearly, we need Scriptural balance and guidance on this issue. Our first stop and foundation is this truth:

The Holy Spirit is a Person

When we say that, understand that we do not mean He is a human person. We mean that He has personality – that is, He is a being, not a force. He is a Person in that He has a will, emotions and intellect. Now, that might seem obvious. But it's not thinking through that truth that causes a lot of errors.

For example, every cult denies that the Holy Spirit is a Person. They regard Him as a force, as a power, as the will of God, or simply as the nature of God, but not as a Person, as God Himself. But Scripture is very clear that the Holy Spirit is a Person. Firstly, listen to Jesus' words describing the Holy Spirit:

Howbeit when He, the Spirit of truth, is come, He will guide you into all truth: for He shall not speak of Himself; but whatsoever He shall hear, that shall He speak: and He will shew you things to come. He shall glorify me: for He shall receive of mine, and shall shew it unto you.

John 16:13-14

Notice the pronoun "He." Jesus does not say when 'it' shall come, or 'it shall speak of itself.' No, instead, nine times, a singular, masculine pronoun is used. This shows Jesus is speaking about a person. This is significant because in the Scripture, the word 'spirit' is almost always neuter - which is not 'he' or 'she,' but 'it.' So Jesus is underlining that the Holy Spirit is a person.

Scripture is also filled with examples of things that He does that only a Person can do. **John 16:13** says He guides. It takes personality to intelligently guide. Earlier in the chapter, Jesus says, "And when He is come, He will reprove the world" (**John 16:8**). He will convict. Convicting of sin requires that He be a Person, not a force. In **Romans 8:26**, we find that the Spirit prays for believers. An object cannot pray. The power of God cannot pray. It takes a Person to pray.

Not only does He exhibit actions that can only be done by a Person, but He has the attributes of a Person. In **Ephesians 4:30**, Paul says, "grieve not the Holy Spirit of God." So He can be grieved by our sin. That shows emotion. And in speaking of spiritual gifts, Paul says, "But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as He will" (**1 Corinthians 12:11**). This shows the Holy Spirit makes choices and decides – that is an attribute belonging to personality.

Then, **1 Corinthians 2:10-11**, we find Him knowing and searching the things of God: "But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God. For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God." This means He has intelligence. So will, intellect and emotion add up to a typical definition of personality.

We could show other examples, but these are surely enough. Throughout Scripture, we see people relating to the Spirit of God in a way which is only possible if He is a Person. We see Ananias and Saphira lying to the Holy Spirit, we see Jesus saying that the Pharisees were blaspheming the Spirit, we see the writer of Hebrews stating that we can insult the Holy Spirit.

Even in **Genesis 6:3**, we hear God saying that His Spirit is not always going to strive or contend with man. So – the Holy Spirit is a Person. Let the application of that truth sink in. If He is a Person, then you must ask yourself – how am I relating to this Person? Two persons that come into contact with each other have some kind of relationship. What is yours to the Spirit?

Well, we've established that He is a Person. But that does not complete the picture. I mean, Michael the archangel is a person. Gabriel is a person. Satan is a person – they all have personality. The second major truth about the Holy Spirit is this:

The Holy Spirit is God

See, not only is He a Person, He is one of three Persons in the Godhead. He is God the Spirit. And perhaps one of the reasons why people have gone wrong with the Holy Spirit is to somehow think of Him as less than God, or even as the inferior member of the Trinity. He is not. He is co-equal with the Father and the Son, and is just as much God, just as eternal, as They are.

Where do we find the Spirit linked with God? Well, firstly, we have all the passages that mention all three together. The most famous is **Matthew 28:19**: *"Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."* Notice it's one name – but three Persons. Paul's benediction in **2 Corinthians 13:14** also mentions all: *"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all."*

In his previous letter, Paul uses the Trinity as an example of diversity with unity: *"Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all"* (**1 Corinthians 12:4-6**). The same Spirit... the same Lord... the same God – Spirit, Christ and Father.

Paul does this again when speaking on unity: *"There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all"* (**Ephesians 4:4-6**). Sixteen times the Holy Spirit is related by name to the other persons of the Trinity. In **Acts 16:7** He is called "the Spirit of Jesus" and in **1 Corinthians 6:11** He is called "the Spirit of our God."

So in all of these places, the Holy Spirit is clearly put on an equal basis with the Father and the Son. Not only that, but we find the Holy Spirit doing things in Scripture which only God can do. We see Him involved in the creation of the world at the very beginning: *"And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters"* (**Genesis 1:2**).

He was also the cause of the virgin birth: *"And the angel answered and said unto her, the Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God"* (**Luke 1:35**). If Christ was God, and He was, then the cause of His birth had to be divine. Therefore the Spirit is God.

The fact that The Spirit knows everything shows He is God. **Isaiah 40:13** is a great verse: *"Who hath directed the Spirit of the LORD, or being His counsellor hath taught Him?"* You can't teach the Spirit of God – nor can He learn anything. He knows everything, and only God knows all that is knowable.

Also, the Spirit of God is everywhere. David writes in a fantastic Psalm: *"Whither shall I go from Thy spirit? Or whither shall I flee from Thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, Thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, Thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall Thy hand lead me, and Thy right hand shall hold me"* (**Psalms 139:7-10**). Only God can be in all places at all times. The Spirit is omnipresent – an attribute belonging only to God.

Very importantly, Scripture pairs up the Spirit with God. In **Acts 5:3**, Peter says to Ananias, *"But Peter said, Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land?"* Then listen to the end of verse 4: *"Thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God."* Clearly, Peter regarded the Spirit as God.

What's also important is how in the New Testament, writers will quote an Old Testament passage in which Yahweh spoke, and attribute it to the Spirit of God: *"Well spake the Holy Ghost by Esaias the prophet unto our fathers, saying, 'Go unto this people, and say, Hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and not perceive'"* (**Acts 28:25-26**).

So, the Spirit has Personality, and the Spirit is God. He is part of the tri-unity of the Godhead, a Person who can be pleased or grieved, a Person with emotions, intellect and a will. He is not less than the Father or the Son, but co-equal with Them, and worthy of worship and honour.

This is just the foundation. We must still ask and answer the harder questions. How does the Holy Spirit work today? Is it any different from previous times? What about the baptism of the Holy Spirit and His indwelling? What about spiritual gifts? In Part 2 of this 4-part series, we will continue to examine the misunderstood Holy Spirit.